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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, EUR/ACE, SCA/PPD, DRL

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: IMPLEMENTING "EDUCATION REFORM"

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: September 1 marked the first day of the new school year in Turkmenistan under new educational reforms that President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov enacted after taking office in February 2007. The changes, which include a new tenth year of elementary and secondary school and a fifth year of university, signal a clean break from former President Niyazov's benighted policies. However, under Berdimuhamedov, educational reform seems to mean new buildings and new technology, but we see little evidence yet of fundamental educational reform. Still, the president deserves a measure of credit for repudiating Niyazov's view that "dim people are easier to rule." END SUMMARY.

NIYAZOV'S CHOPPED YEARS RESTORED

3. (U) President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov inaugurated the official opening of the 2007-2008 academic year with a new package of reforms and improvements that break from the Niyazov past. The Ministry of Education has restored the tenth year of elementary and secondary education, and the standard for post-secondary education is now five years, instead of the grudging two Niyazov had reduced it to. The government also raised teacher salaries and student stipends by up to 40 percent. New boarding schools were opened in the provinces to help students from remote areas, where schools are not available, to attend school and receive an education. The government also plans to construct 25 kindergartens throughout the school year.

CURRICULUM REVISED

4. (SBU) School curriculum was revised both at the secondary and higher education level, and new subjects were introduced, or re-introduced, including physical education and civics. In an August meeting, Minister of Education Annaamonov told the Charge every teacher in Turkmenistan had already been called to Ashgabat and "retrained" for the new school year. Former President Niyazov's

"Ruhnama" remains in the curriculum but for only one hour a week, except in tenth grade where two hours a week are required. In his address on September 1, Berdimuhamedov stressed the national education system has to be in line with world standards of education, but it also needs to "reflect the spiritual-moral, philosophical values accumulated by Turkmen ancestors."

IT'S NOT YET NIRVANA

15. (SBU) Despite the changes, problems remain. It was reported the Ministry of Education was to publish 48 book titles for the new academic year but fell short of this goal. Street rumors suggested many students started their school year with "very old books," some even from the Soviet era (at least in schools with Russian-language instruction), and others with no books at all. At one school, students of the new tenth grade were notified to bring their notebooks from last year and told their tenth year would be a "review" of the ninth. The UNICEF Representative in Turkmenistan, who visited a school outside of Ashgabat on September 1, reported to DCM that the school had 40 computers for students (not connected to the Internet), but not enough books for instruction.

COMPUTERS

16. (SBU) On August 31, Hewlett-Packard executives were in Ashgabat scrambling for high-level government meetings. On September 3, Foreign Minister Meredov confirmed to the Charge they had met with the Minister of Education and Vice Premier for Education Saparliyev. Subsequent press reports announced the government has ordered 12,000 HP dual-processor Pentium 4 computers for schools across Turkmenistan, and that 1,200 teachers would receive special computer training.

NEW SCHOOLS

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17. (SBU) As part of the Soviet-tradition first-day-of-school festivities, President Berdimuhamedov cut the ribbon for two model schools in Ashgabat. The diplomatic corps was invited to the first event, the opening of the specialized elementary and secondary school for pre-medical education in the emerging "medical sector" near the embassy housing compound that already contains the new Ministry of Health, and where a high-rise research oncology hospital and a new medical university are under construction.

18. (SBU) During the presidential tour of the new school, visitors saw students at work on computerized lessons, and a teacher conducted a sample cellular biology lesson using a wall-sized touch-screen linked to laptops around the room. The school was built for 600 students and 160 pre-schoolers. The Minister of Education told the Charge that equivalent model schools would open in each provincial capital by the beginning of the next school year.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Under Berdimuhamedov, educational reform seems to mean new buildings and new technology, but we see little evidence yet of fundamental educational reform. Indeed, the Head of the International Department at the Ministry of Education has so far done everything he can to block new offers of education cooperation from the United States and the European Union. However, the president deserves a measure of credit for repudiating Niyazov's view that "dim people are easier to rule." END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND